

Lincoln. h. 219. 6th page after cover

The Outlook

Published Weekly

DOUBLE NUMBER

THE LIGHT BREAKING OVER
STAND-PAT INDIANA

STAFF CORRESPONDENCE BY

FREDERICK M. DAVENPORT

EXPERIENCES IN FRANCE

BY WILFRED T. GRENFELL

THE NEW ADIRONDACKS

BY RAYMOND S. SPEARS

A TENTH-CENTURY BARBARIAN

BY GEORGE KENNAN

AMERICAN BUSINESS AS AFFECTED BY
PEACE AND PREPAREDNESS

BY THEODORE H. PRICE

FOR COMPLETE TABLE OF CONTENTS SEE
THIRD PAGE PRECEDING READING MATTER

WEDNESDAY, MAY 24, 1916

PRICE: TEN CENTS A COPY

THREE DOLLARS A YEAR

381 FOURTH AVENUE, NEW YORK



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2016

<https://archive.org/details/lessonfromhistor00abbo>

A LESSON FROM HISTORY

BY LYMAN ABBOTT

FIFTY years ago I saw my country pass through the valley of the shadow of death and emerge upon the other side into the light of a better day. Perhaps it is for this reason that I experience less tremor of anxiety now than some of my contemporaries. I propose here to retell briefly some of the scenes and incidents which immediately preceded the inauguration of President Lincoln, March 4, 1861. They seem to me to throw some light on present duties. But I shall tell the story without attempting to trace the parallel or draw the moral.

The election of Abraham Lincoln in November, 1860, was followed immediately by an active preparation for revolt in the South. The Judge and District Attorney of the United States Court in South Carolina at once tendered their resignations. The resignations of the United States Senators followed. The Legislature, by resolution unanimously passed, called a State Convention to consider the future relations of South Carolina with the United States. Palmetto flags were set a-flying and minute-men paraded the streets of Charleston. Drilling of soldiers in preparation for possible war began. The market value of plantation slaves fell fifty per cent. Travel from the North ceased. Economy became a fashion. Concerts, balls, and even weddings were discontinued. In the Episcopal churches prayer for the President of the United States by common consent ceased. The new Governor of South Carolina, inaugurated December 17, expressed the common purpose of the people in saying that "South Carolina is resolved to assert her separate independence, and, as she acceded separately to the compact of Union, so she will most assuredly secede separately and alone, be the consequences what they may." The State Convention passed an ordinance of secession unanimously. The news was received with cheers, with a salute of guns and the ringing of church chimes. Other States rapidly followed. Early in February a Confederacy, including the six cotton States, was organized at Montgomery, Alabama. There should have been no misunderstanding in the North of the significance of these events.

They meant either surrender to the slave power or civil war. But none are so blind as those who will not see.

Threats of disunion had been common in National elections ever since the nullification movement under Calhoun in 1832. They were abundant in the campaign which resulted in the election of Abraham Lincoln. The North had heard the cry, "Wolf! Wolf!" so often that the warning ceased to warn. But conservatives took the cry seriously. Webster's fear of "States dissevered, discordant, belligerent, a land rent with civil feuds, or drenched, it may be, in fraternal blood," were sincere. The apprehensions which carried through Congress the compromise measures of 1850 were real apprehensions and, as the event proved, well founded. A few radicals believed them well founded. I had written to my cousin as early as 1856 that I anticipated war and was ready for the battle. I preferred half a Nation free to a whole Nation slave. But I had been a great admirer of Daniel Webster. As I was converted to the anti-slavery cause partly by inherited sympathies, partly by the eloquence of Henry Ward Beecher, my anticipations of a civil war were not improbably a left-over from earlier and boyish impressions. In 1860 by Republicans generally the cry of "Save the Union!" was regarded as a political slogan, and the carefully cultivated fears of secession were regarded as a political bogey.

The post-election preparations in the South for armed resistance to the United States Government wrought at once a revolution in Northern sentiment. The men who loved peace more than liberty and feared war more than the perpetuation of injustice came to the front. The pacifists of that time, organized and unorganized, brought forward all manner of plans for pacification. It was proposed to let the erring sisters go in peace; to reenact the Missouri Compromise and allow slavery to exist in territories south of a designated line; to secure Mr. Lincoln's resignation and proceed to another Presidential election; to secure the adhesion of the border States to the Union by compromise and let the cotton States go. On the same day that the cotton States met at Montgomery

to form a Southern Confederacy a peace convention met at Washington to consider these various plans and endeavor to work out some scheme of compromise. In this convention twenty-one States were represented, and among the delegates were men of high character and recognized leadership. But it came to nothing. No common ground could be found for Republicans who demanded acquiescence in Lincoln's election, Southerners who demanded Constitutional guarantees for slavery, and Northern conservatives willing to accede to almost anything to prevent disunion.

James Buchanan, elected President four years before by a coalition of Southern advocates of slavery and Northern advocates of compromise, was a man of good intentions, but without either the intellectual or the moral strength required for such a crisis. In his conduct of the Administration during the Kansas imbroglio he had shown himself possessed of too much conscience to be the subservient tool of the slave power, and of too little courage to be its frank and fearless enemy. He belonged to that very considerable class of public men whose only method of determining what their public action shall be is by endeavoring to foresee its probable consequences. He was guided by his hopes and fears, not by his faith in any great moral principle. He could not have followed Emerson's advice and hitched his wagon to a star, because he could not see the star. In his Message of December 3 following the election of Mr. Lincoln he argued against disunion. He appealed to the North by declaring that a State had no right to secede; he appealed to the South by declaring that the Government had no right to coerce a State if it did secede. He attempted to settle the controversy between North and South by the pleasing assumption that there is always truth on both sides, an assumption often made, but not always true, and in great crises never a remedy. His Attorney-General, Jeremiah Black, attempted to show him a way out: Do not coerce a State, he said; simply collect the taxes, which is a sufficient exercise of Federal authority for the present. For this purpose you do not need to take possession of the Custom-House in Charleston; you can put a revenue cutter in the harbor. But this counsel required doing something, not merely saying something, and doing something required a courage which President Buchanan did not possess. The

Attorney-General resigned because the President was too pacific. Secretary Cass and Secretary Cobb followed him, Secretary Cobb because the President was not pacific enough. The disorganized Administration did nothing to prepare for the impending war. The Southern Confederacy, with far fewer resources, pushed forward its preparations with great energy.

It is perhaps the greatest weakness of the United States Constitution that it provides an interregnum of four months between the election of a new President in November and his inauguration in March. The outgoing President hesitates to initiate any policy, partly because he cannot execute it, partly because it will embarrass his successor. The incoming President cannot initiate any policy because he has no authority. During this interregnum, from November 7, 1860, to March 4, 1861, the country drifted—drifted—drifted. The official leader of the people refused to lead. The people, confused by a multitude of unofficial and conflicting leaders, could do nothing.

Mr. Lincoln did not assume leadership. He answered frankly and fearlessly any questions put to him by any one who had a right to question, but he took no part in the increasing public agitation in the North. The people had decided by the election what to do, and had intrusted him with the doing of it. The time for discussion had passed; the time for action had come; and he waited till the time should arrive when he would have authority to embody in action the decision of the people. In his Cooper Union speech, delivered on the evening of February 27, 1860, he had defined both the policy which the North should adopt and the principle upon which that policy was founded. The Republican party by nominating him had adopted that policy and that principle, and in his election both had been adopted by the Nation. The policy was: Slavery sectional, liberty National. The principle I quote in his own words:

"If slavery is right, all words, acts, laws, and constitutions against it are themselves wrong and should be silenced and swept away. If it is right, we cannot justly object to its nationality—its universality. If it is wrong, they cannot justly insist upon its extension—its enlargement. All they ask we could readily grant if we thought slavery right; all we ask they could as readily grant if they thought it wrong."

This speech has been deservedly praised

for its clearness, its compact reasoning, and its condensed and accurate history. A contemporaneous critic says of it: "A single, easy, simple sentence of plain Anglo-Saxon words contains a chapter of history that, in some instances, has taken days of labor to verify, and which must have cost the author months of investigation to acquire." What in that speech most impressed me, one of the audience, was its clearness of moral vision and its strength of moral purpose. With nothing of the dramatic brilliance of John B. Gough, or the passionate emotionalism of Henry Ward Beecher, or the rapier-like keenness of Wendell Phillips, or the cultivated grace of George William Curtis, it had a moral power unsurpassed by that of any orator I have ever heard. It possessed a kind of indefinable force such as I imagine might have characterized Moses in giving the Ten Commandments to Israel.

The issue then was not as clear as it seems now; the grounds for compromise seemed greater. The argument of the slaveholder was very simple and, if his premise was granted, unanswerable. The slave was property and was implicitly recognized as property by the Constitution. Every citizen of the United States had a right to have his property protected in every part of the United States. Therefore the slaveholder had a right to take his slave into any Territory of the United States and into the several States. The argument of the Northern conservatives was equally simple. No benefit to the slave could compensate for the disaster to the Nation and to the world from the disruption of the Union. The answer to both arguments was that furnished by Abraham Lincoln in his Cooper Union speech: If slavery was right, the slaveholders were entitled to carry their slaves with them into every part of the United States; if slavery was wrong, the North had no right to allow slaves to be carried into States and Territories from which the North had Constitutional authority to exclude them. If slavery was right, no compromise with it was necessary; if slavery was wrong, no compromise with slavery was justifiable.

During that trying interregnum, when a timid, vacillating President, guided by his fears, not by his faith, pursued a policy of gentle persuasion, while traitors in his Cabinet conspired for the overthrow of the Government which they had sworn to protect and co-operated with citizens outside who, with an almost fanatical enthusiasm, believed their

first loyalty was due to their State, not to the Nation, Mr. Lincoln spoke no word of bitterness against either the President at Washington, his disloyal counselors, or the secessionists in the South. His first speech after his election expressed the spirit which never departed from him. "In all our rejoicings, let us neither express nor cherish any hard feelings towards any citizen who by his vote has differed with us. Let us at all times remember that all American citizens are brothers of a common country and should dwell together in the bonds of fraternal feeling." But this kindness of feeling was accompanied with a heroic inflexibility of purpose. To every suggestion of compromise, and many were made to him, he had but one answer, repeated again and again in conversation and in letters: "Entertain no proposition for a compromise in regard to the extension of slavery. The instant you do, they have us under again; all our labor is lost and sooner or later must be done over."

No pacifist of his day was more eager for peace than Abraham Lincoln. Nothing he ever wrote has greater pathetic power than the appeal to the South with which he closed his first inaugural: "I am loth to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break, our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature." But when South Carolina responded to this plea for peace by the bombardment of Fort Sumter, President Lincoln made no further plea. Fort Sumter fell on the 14th of April. On the 15th of April the President issued his call for seventy-five thousand volunteers to protect the honor of the Nation. With that call ended the spirit of pacifism in the perplexed people, and the conflicting and futile plans for compromise which that spirit had inspired. And throughout the four years' tragedy of the awful war which followed never once did Mr. Lincoln swerve from the conviction that peace is never to be made with unrighteousness, never to be purchased at the expense of liberty and justice.

At length the war drew toward its close. General McClellan was nominated by the Democratic party on a peace platform. And

Horace Greeley, the foremost pacifist of his time, who in 1860 had proposed to purchase peace by letting the South secede, made another effort to open peace negotiations with the Southern Confederacy. The question of Mr. Lincoln's re-election was approaching. The result was gravely doubted. Mr. Greeley was among the doubters. A scheme was concocted, whether by friends of the Confederacy or by ambitious busybodies or by both combined is not quite clear, to seduce Mr. Lincoln into taking action which would create a public impression that he was suing for peace. Mr. Greeley, whose humane sentiments were greater than his knowledge of men, allowed himself to become the negotiator for these schemes. He wrote to the President a passionate plea for peace, urging him to open negotiations with pseudo peace commissioners from the South. "I venture to remind you," he wrote, "that our bleeding, bankrupt, almost dying country also longs for peace; shudders at the prospect of fresh conscriptions, of further wholesale devastations, and of new rivers of human blood. And a widespread conviction that the Government and its prominent supporters are not anxious for peace, and do not improve proffered opportunities to achieve it, is doing great harm now, and is morally certain, unless removed, to do far greater in the approaching elections." Mr. Lincoln promptly replied that if Mr. Greeley could find any person, anywhere, professing to have any proposition from Jefferson Davis, in writing, for peace, embracing the restoration of the Union and the abandonment of slavery, Mr. Greeley might bring him to the President. This offer brought no other response than a further effort for an unconditional peace conference, to which Mr. Lincoln replied in the following explicit paper:

Executive Mansion,
Washington, July 18, 1864.

To Whom It May Concern :

Any proposition which embraces the restoration of peace, the integrity of the whole Union, and the abandonment of slavery, and which comes by and with an authority that can control the armies now at war against the United States, will be received and considered by the Executive Government of the United States, and will be met by liberal terms on other substantial and collateral points, and the bearer or bearers thereof shall have safe-conduct both ways.

Nothing came of this because there was no person authorized by or in behalf of the Southern Confederacy to consider peace on any such terms. Nine months later came the surrender of General Lee to General Grant at Appomattox Court-House, and with it peace on the only terms on which abiding peace can ever be attained—by a decisive victory over wrong. Some one has recently called attention to the difference between a pacifist and a pacificator. Horace Greeley was a pacifist. The pacificators of that time were Abraham Lincoln and General Grant.

Probably nothing could have prevented the Civil War. The difference between the feudalism of the South and the democracy of the North was too radical to be settled by argument, and the passions which had been excited both by a mistaken conscience and an unscrupulous ambition were too intense to be assuaged except by blood. But it is certain that the war was needlessly prolonged by the unpreparedness of the North, the compromising spirit in Northern pacifists, and the timidity and vacillation of the Nation's President.

I have great respect for many of the pacifist leaders of this time, as I had for those of fifty-five years ago. Some among them I esteem as personal friends. But their supreme wish for peace is not mine. As long as there is injustice in the world, so long I wish to war against it. Whether in this eternal war against wrong one shall fight with voice or pen or sword must depend partly on the nature of the wrong, partly on the best method of attack, and partly on his personal abilities. But acquiescence in wrong or compromise with wrong—never!

I have lived through one terrible war, fought against slavery and secession, and have seen the peace won by that war blessing an emancipated and united people. I expect to see peace for the world won, as it was won for my own dear land, not by compromise with wrong, but by conquering it. I expect to see, though perhaps not with mortal eyes, the ocean untroubled by undersea pirates, the air undarkened by human birds of prey, and Europe, emancipated from the militarism which she has created, drawn together in a brotherhood transcending race, religion, and nationality, and inspired by a spirit of universal justice and universal liberty.